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ABSTRACT

An alternative to the traditional standardized test of langauge proficiency administered to Israeli students at the end of secondary school is proposed as a means of giving schools more autonomy in the testing process. The test was designed based on the following assumptions: (1) the test matches the curriculum and not vice versa; (2) the classroom teacher is concerned, professional, and capable in the testing process; (3) the evaluation is independent of pre-secondary evaluation; and (4) the use of scores accomplished on tests throughout secondary school gives a more accurate psychometric picture than a single standardized test score. The alternative model for assessment in English as a second language (ESL) would provide teachers with professional training in ESL testing procedures, continuous language assessment for the last three years of secondary school, and a national monitoring and information dissemination system concerning ESL proficiency for the entire educational system. The model has been piloted in several schools in ESL, mathematics, and Hebrew writing for four years. Questions have arisen about the model, some of which will be resolved and some of which may remain deficiencies of the model. However, it is important that the alternative be evaluated on its own merit and not in comparison with the existing system. (MSE)

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AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR ASSESSING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AT THE END OF SECONDARY SCHOOL*

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1. Introduction

Upon graduation from secondary school most students undergo some kind of evaluation of their achievement and proficiency. This evaluation is generally meant to assess students' achievements in relation to what they have been taught in school and/or to predict their performances in higher education. The evaluation often serves as the main criterion for acceptance and placement into higher education. It is a crucial assessment for the individual student since it can affect his/her future opportunities.

Educational systems around the world differ in the way they evaluate students' knowledge at the end of the secondary school. These differences can best be described on a continuum where on one side of it there are systems in which an external test is administred at the end of the secondary school, and the performance of the student on that test is his secondary school evaluation. On the other side of the continuum there are countries in which the school or the individual teacher assigns the end of secondary school evaluation without the intervention of any external body. In between these two extreme points there are systems in which some elements of the evaluation are done externally while others are done internally by the teachers in the schools.

It is difficult, and perhaps even irrelevant, to determine which testing system is preferable; the decision to adopt a certain testing system depends on a number of considerations which are specific to each educational system of a given country. In Israel, for example, a central system was adopted because at the time of the establishment of the country, when people immigrated from many different countries, there was a need for a central testing system which would serve as a unifying force for this diverse population. The external central test provided the Ministry of Education with an effective tool for carrying out this goal. Thus, till today, under the existing system students' knowledge in language and in other school subjects is assessed by the Ministry of Education via an external test administered at the end of secondary school. The national inspector of a given subject, with the aid of a small committee, write the test which is then administered to a select group of high school students (about 25 % of a given age level).

In the past few years there has been a call for giving schools more autonomy and independence and for possibly abolishing the external test at the end of secondary school.

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The purpose of this paper is to describe a testing model which is currently being experimented with, and which could possibly serve as an alternative for the centralized testing system currently in use in Israel. In the next section a number of dimensions which are an integral part of any testing system will be presented, leading to a description of the proposed alternative model, its principles, assumptions and implementation procedures.

2. Testing dimensions

Zack (1981) lists a number of dimensions which are part of any testing system. The first testing dimension is the location of the testing body i.e. who determines what will be tested. This relates to whether the testing body is external such as a Ministry of Education, or internal such as the school or the class teacher. In centralized educational systems the assessment is generally done by the Ministry of Education while in more autonomous systems the evaluation is done internally by the students' teacher, or the school.

The second dimension is the time and frequency of the assessment. In some educational systems the assessment is done once, usually at the end of the twelfth grade. In other systems the evaluation at the end of secondary school is based on multiple assessments over a longer period of time. When the assessment is done once the student's score is determined by a single test; when the assessment is based on a number of evaluations it can also take into account his performance on projects, class participation and a number of tests. Thus, in a one-shot type of evaluation students' performance on the single test is crucial for their score - a failure or success on that test is extremely meaningful. When the evaluation is continuous a student has a number of opportunities to perform and improve.

The third dimension mentioned by Zack is the number of students tested. In some systems only a small proportion of the students are being tested by the final secondary school test. This is related to the selection procedures which are generally based on the probability of a student to succeed on the final external test. In other systems all students of a given age level are being tested regardless of their probability to succeed on the test. When all the students of a given age are being tested, there is an increase in the opportunities of a larger number of students.

Another dimension of the end-of-secondary school evaluation is the purpose of the test - predictive, summative, or diagnostic. A test may predict students' knowledge in some given future situation, it may reflect the knowledge that was acquired in school without relating it to specific future situations, or it may provide feed-back and diagnostic information to teachers and students.

The last dimension which was not mentioned by Zack but nevertheless important, is the professionalization of the testing

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body. This relates to the extent to which those who prepare the tests are qualified and trained in planning, writing and analyzing tests. Since the field of testing has become so sophisticated in recent years it requires qualification and training in areas such as measurement and psychometrics. Thus this dimension relates to the extent to which those who write the tests are professional testers. In centralized systems those who write the tests are often the subject supervisors who are knowledgeable in the area they supervise, but lack the appropriate knowledge in testing theory and practice. In educational systems where the teachers or principals prepare the test, they too lack this knowledge. Therefore, in some systems the task of writing the tests is given to a professional body such as a research institute or a testing agency.

The above represent a number of dimensions of the end of secondary school testing systems. It should be clear now that testing systems can differ by (a) the quality of the testing body - external or internal, (b) the frequency of the test administration - one shot versus a continuous evaluation; (c) the purpose of the test - predictive, summative or diagnostic; (d) the proportion of students tested - a select group or the total age group; and (d) the professionalization of the testing body - amateur, trained/amateur or professional. In the next section an alternative model will be described in the context of these dimensions.

3. The alternative model

The alternative model can best be understood by stating its four basic assumptions - pedagogical, professional, social and psychometric. These will be explained by way of comparing with the existing system. The assumptions will be related to the dimensions described above.

The pedagogical assumption of the alternative model is that the test matches the curriculum and not vice versa. This is contrary to the existing model where the test provides the tool for implementing the curriculum, and the teachers teach for the test.

The professional assumption is that the classroom teacher is a concerned individual who is capable and able of handling the secondary school evaluation task. His knowledge in testing procedures is obtained through extensive training by professional testers. As a result the teacher has the responsibility as well as the authority of assigning these evaluations. This is a different assumption than the existing system where the teacher is responsible for the testing of his students, but the authority of assigning the evaluation belongs to the external agency, the Ministry of Education.

The social assumption is that there is equal opportunity at the beginning of secondary school as well as at the end of secondary school. This implies that those who enter secondary

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school receive an evaluation at the end and it is unrelated to their probability of performing on the external test as is the case in the existing system.

The psychometric assumption is that multiple tests and other forms of evaluation are administered to the students for determining their grades over a number of years. This leads to a more accurate and valid assessment, since the score is based on a larger sample of scores. Assigning a score based on one test, as is the case in the existing system, cannot be accurate enough psychometrically.

The above assumptions lead to the following operational principles of the alternative model as they relate to English as a Foreign Language (EFL):

1. Student achievements in EFL are assessed by their teachers who are trained by professional testers in testing procedures.

2. The assessment of students' knowledge in EFL is done continuously throughout the last three years of secondary school.

3. A national monitoring system provides comparative information for the schools and the entire educational system on the EFL proficiency of students.

Figure 1 displays the five dimensions of any testing system as they relate to the existing and the alternative testing systems.

Figure 1 DIMENSIONS OF TESTING SYSTEMS IN THE EXISTING MODEL AND IN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

Dimension	Existing system	Alternative
1. Location of testing body	External (Ministry of Education)	Internal (teachers)
2. Time	Once, at the end of 12th grade	Continuous - over a period of the last 3 years of secondary school
3. Purpose	Predictive, summative	Formative and summative
4. Proportion of students tested	Low	High
5. Professionalization of testing body	Amateur	Trained/amateurs

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Dimensions 1 - 4 are taken from Zack, 1981.

It can be seen that in the first dimension - the location of the testing body, the existing system is external (the Ministry of Education) and in the alternative model, it is internal - the students' own teachers. In the second dimension the time, the existing system bases the evaluation on one test while the alternative model is based on a continuous evaluation over a period of 3 years. In the existing system the test's purpose is prediction and summary while in the alternative model it is formative. The continuous evaluation allows students to obtain feed-back and this is likely to affect their performance over the three-year period. In the third dimension under the existing system, only a small proportion of secondary school students reach the 12th grade since only those who are likely to pass the final test are selected to continue. In the alternative model, on the other hand, all students who attend secondary school, regardless of their likelihood to pass the external test, obtain the secondary school evaluation. In the last dimension, the professionalization of the testing body, in the existing model the testing body is amateur, while in the alternative model it is the students' teachers who obtain training in testing to become trained/amateurs.

4. Implementation of the alternative model

A description of the process by which the alternative model is implemented is given below.

4.1. Training of teachers

Since in the alternative model the EFL teacher is the one who assigns the evaluation at the end of secondary school and he is viewed as a professional, he is being trained extensively in the testing and evaluation of EFL achievement and proficiency by professional testers.

The professionalization is achieved in the following ways:

a) A number of workshops are conducted by the University testing team, and teachers learn about procedures and techniques for planning, constructing and analyzing language tests. Examples of topics which are included in the workshops are: test planning, writing, item and tasks, analysis of items and tests, testing the four skills, the use of rating scales, assigning grades, etc.

b) Monthly meetings are conducter in the schools between members of the university testing team and the individual teachers. The purpose of these meetings is to practice and implement the material learned in the workshops to the specific situations of individual teachers in their classes.

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c) A tester's guidebook is distributed to the teacher, which contains a description of testing procedures, and ample samples of test items and tasks.

d) An item bank is constructed which includes a large number of test items and tasks which have been previously tried out and which contain psychometric data. This enables teachers to select items to suit their teaching objectives. Most of these items are written by trained teachers themselves, but have gone through statistical analyses by the testing team.

4.2. Following students' achievements over the last three years of secondary school:

Students performances on tests, projects and in class are recorded. Feed-back about this performance is constantly being fed to the students and to the teachers. Students' final score is generally an average of his performances in each of these activities each year.

4.3. A monitoring system

A national norming test is administrered in order to compare and adjust the scores of each test taker as assigned by the teachers. This ensures that the annual final score that the teacher has assigned is adjusted so it is not inflated or deflated by the teacher. Several procedures for adjusting the scores are experimented with, and tests in all the four language skills are developed. Thus, it is possible to obtain an estimation of the national EFL proficiency level and the performance of students in realation to this norm. A student's final score is a combination of the scores assigned by his teachers over a period of three years and his performance on this test. In the formula which combines these two components, the teacher's score counts more than the national test. The monitoring system is viewed as a temporary phase in the process of moving from the existing system to the alternative system. It is hoped that when teachers will become more professional as testers, there will not be a need for this norming system.

5. Conclusion

The alternative model is currently being implemented, on an experimental basis only, in a number of schools in Israel. It is now the fourth year of the experiment and there have already been students whose end-of-secondary school score was assigned by their teachers who had been extensively trained in testing. The students' scores were based on their performance in EFL over three years and the score that the teacher assigned had to be sometimes "adjusted" according to their class performance on the national monitoring system.

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Several questions have come up during the research. Some can be solved and others may be viewed as deficiecies of the model. The questions relate to the extent to which teachers who already have "bad" testing habits can actually change their habits and start implementing new procedures. A further problem relates to the difficulty of accumulating scores over a long period and the weight that schould be given to students' achievement in each grade and for each area. A serious point of controversy is the monitoring system. Those who oppose it claim that if the assumption is that the teacher is a professional, why does tho score that he assigns need adjustment.

These are just some of the problems and questions raised. However, the advantages of giving more autonomy to teachers in testing as well as in teaching, the availability of teachers who know how to test, the existence of an item bank which can facilitate teachers' testing tasks, the continuous feedback to students and teachers, the fact that students' score is based on a large number of performances of different kinds, and the opportunity for more students to enter and complete secondary school education, all these seem to be more in line with the current mood and trend in the Israeli educational system.

Several research and evaluation projects are taking place within the experimental implementation of the model, in an attempt to judge its effectiveness in each of the three subjects (EFL, Mathematics and Hebrew writing). So far it seems that different conclusions are reached in each of these subjects.

However, it should be noted that the effectivenes of the alternative model must not be judged in comparison with the existing system, but rather by judging its own effectiveness and its feasibility for implementation. The decision of a country to use the alternative type of evaluation or the existing one depends on a number of factors. Does the country want to grant more authority to teachers, which means less authority to a central agency, which again means losing its controlling power? Does the country want a more democratic, more autonomous system and thus allow a larger proportion of students to enter and graduate from academic secondary schools? Does the country want to open its high school doors to all students? Does it view teachers as capable of taking the authority and responsibility? These and similar questions need to be answered before any new testing system is introduced. It is clear then that the testing system at the end of secondary school is a complex problem which involves, in addition to testing factors, educational, social, political, economical and philosophical considerations.

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This article is written in memory of Professor Itai Zack whose belief in equal opportunities in education underlies the concept of the alternative model.
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